The Road to Dallas

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(Today's column is by Drew Pearson and his associate, Jack Anderson)

Washington.

The chief reason for Kennedy family bitterness against LBJ immediately after the assassination was the belief that it was the Vice President who had persuaded John F. Kennedy to go to Texas.

But we have done some careful research and find that the facts are exactly the opposite. It was President Kennedy himself, not the Vice President, who initiated the trip. Here is the story:

In August, 1961, eight months after Kennedy was inaugurated, he approached Speaker Sam Rayburn regarding a trip to Texas and asked him to handle the preparations. Rayburn said he would be glad to do so, but the time was not ripe. He suggested Kennedy wait until after the 1962 Congressional and gubernatorial elections.

Rayburn died on Nov. 16, 1961. The following August, Kennedy conferred with another Texas Congressman, the late Albert Thomas of Houston, who had helped make that city an important capital for the space program. Thomas suggested a Presidential fund-raising dinner in Houston could raise a lot of money for the Democratic Party. At that time Dick McGuire, chief Democratic money-raiser, had been pressing Kennedy.

After talking to Thomas, Kennedy phoned Vice President Johnson, who advised him to check with John Connally, Kennedy's Secretary of the Navy, then running for Governor of Texas.

Connally was then embroiled in a tough primary election with Don Yarborough, a liberal Democrat whom he managed to defeat in the final run-off by only 20,000 votes. During the campaign, Connally had said he was opposed to most of Kennedy's program while Yarborough supported Kennedy. Connally made it clear it would be embarrassing to have the President come to Texas during the middle of the campaign.

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After Connally's victory in November, 1962, Dick McGuire telephoned Connally about the proposed Kennedy trip and the fund-raising dinner. Connally replied that the time was still not ripe. He wanted to pay off his own debt, which amounted to nearly $1,500,000—the biggest in Texas politics—and he didn't want money drained off the Democratic National Committee.

Following Governor-elect Connally's negative response, President Kennedy checked with Johnson about the trip. Johnson agreed with Connally.

Six months later, in June, 1963, President Kennedy told both Johnson and Connally that he wanted to go to Texas. He said that Dick McGuire was breathing down his neck to raise some Texas money, and that Rep. Thomas was still promising a big dinner to tap Texas millionaires.

Connally didn't give all the reasons to Kennedy, but he felt the Kennedy visit would not help him politically at all. Among other things the Beldon poll showed Kennedy's political prestige at an all-time low in Texas. Both Connally and Johnson advised the President to wait.

Later in the summer, while Connally was visiting in Washington, President Kennedy proposed that the Texas fund-raising dinner be held Aug. 27, Lyndon Johnson's birthday. Connally said no, it was too close to Labor Day, too many moneyed Texans would be out of town.

But he agreed that the dinner should be held in November. He was still far from enthusiastic, but inasmuch as Kennedy had appointed Connally Secretary of the Navy, Connally owed him some support and finally agreed on the November date. Significantly, the President admonished Connally: "Don't tell Lyndon. He'll get his nose out of joint if I go down against his advice."

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Lyndon Johnson didn't learn about the dinner until September. The anti-Connally liberal Democrats were planning a big statewide salute to Sen. Ralph Yarborough, no relation to Don Yarborough but long a Connally opponent.

One night before the Yarborough dinner invitations were put in the mail, Gov. Connally trumped the liberal dinner by announcing that President Kennedy was coming to Texas. This caused a furor. Sen. Yarborough scurried down to the White House to ask about it, but the White House was noncommittal.

On Oct. 20, one day after the biggest dinner in Texas history, for Sen. Yarborough, the White House officially confirmed that Kennedy was going to Texas on Nov. 21-22.

It was only at this point that Vice President Johnson, who had cautioned against the Texas trip in the first place, got official confirmation. He then telephoned several Texas leaders to help assure that the dinner would be a success.

This was the chain of events which led to John F. Kennedy's tragic end.